

# Documentary on the Margins: Bill Stamets' Super-8mm Ethnography

*by Chuck Kleinhans*

## **One: Super-8mm personal vérité**

Although sync sound Super-8mm technically fulfilled the hopes of early cinema vérité filmmaking in the U.S., particularly in allowing for one-person portable filmmaking, surprisingly few memorable works used the format. John Chapman's *Nicaragua: Scenes from the Revolution* employed the small gauge to produce compelling views of the Sandinista insurrection against Somoza. And Marjorie Keller's experimental *Misconception* documented her sister-in-law's delivery of a second child while reflecting on the everyday politics of domestic life and turning the romantic birth film à la Brakhage upside down.

Given the neglect of Super-8mm sound possibilities, Chicago-based documentary filmmaker and photographer Bill Stamets is one of the few using the technology to produce what I call "personal vérité" work — a technology, a style, an aesthetic, and a politics of film/video making that uses single camera sync sound to make documentaries marked by the director's distinct personal vision and interpretation. In watching personal vérité, the spectator frequently experiences the objective recording of the camera lens/microphone and the subjective sense of the maker's presence at the same time.

Stamets' work draws on three different approaches to filmmaking. Like the broadcast T.V. journalist, he typically concentrates on newsworthy public events featuring politicians and members of the public who are joining in an open spectacle, often staged for the media. Like the feature reporter, he uses the camera and editing as tools to examine the immediate incidents in a more thorough way, getting beyond the accent on news value. Joining his journalistic concern, we find an ethnographer's interest in public ceremonies as culturally revealing events. Beyond the simple recording function typical of traditional ethnographic filmmaking, Stamets investigates and interprets with the camera, and through editing he shapes our understanding of contemporary urban rituals. The roles of journalist and ethnographer combine with the experimental filmmaker who uses film as a medium for personal expression. Stamets makes film essays which use unorthodox techniques to further the filmmaker's statement. While not eschewing the communicative function and responsibility of film, Stamets clearly is not bound by the conventional "objective" norms of most journalism and anthropology.



from *Presidential Appearances* (1989) by Bill Stamets

Although Richard Leacock, a pioneer cinema vérité filmmaker in the 1960s, tried to establish Super-8mm as a viable alternative documentary film practice at MIT, it was never widely adopted. Leacock and associates worked primarily with a dual system, using a separate tape recorder sound which then demanded the additional expense of tape stock and transfer to fullcoat for editing. These procedures duplicated the complications of 16mm film without providing the range of lab and other services, larger range of film stocks (including negative), variety of equipment and the large image size. Today, aside from a few fringe uses, Super-8mm is virtually ended as a working format. A few schools still use it for teaching introductory film, and some artists and enthusiasts continue to film in it, but new equipment is no longer available, and rumors continue that Kodak will stop producing the stock.

Super-8mm sound film has some distinctive characteristics which shape the creative product. The equipment is small and inexpensive, offering less intrusion into events. Because it often looks "amateurish," especially when compared to professional broadcast news equipment, the filmmaker can be taken less seriously than the dominant media. Obviously this has a "better and worse" aspect. At times one can get unguarded access or not be noticed; at other times, one is not given access the rest of the press has.

Sound is recorded on a magnetic stripe with an 18-frame separation from the image; the result is that when a shot begins, an image appears for 3/4 of a second (at 24 fps) before the sound is heard. Similarly at the tail of a shot: the sound trails on after the sync image is gone. This peculiar characteristic (which Leacock

wanted to overcome) allows for certain choices in shooting and editing to exploit its nature. For example, in his Presidential campaign documentary, *Iowa and Its Presidents* (1989), Stamets sometimes begins shots of campaigning politicians who appear briefly before their authoritative voice is heard, subtly mocking the logocentrism of political authority. Similarly, at the end of a shot, a politician's voice can be heard (e.g., "Where are we going?") while the body is absent from the frame.

Sound can also be moved and manipulated in editing; in addition to putting new sound over, a second magnetic stripe (not used in the original shooting) can take additional sound. The film is color reversal, which offers excellent originals and somewhat less satisfactory dupes. The standard film cartridge runs for about 2 1/2 minutes of continuous filming. This promotes rather parsimonious shooting compared to video or 16mm, especially when close to the end of roll.

Stamets' work uses and exploits these characteristics of Super-8mm film as well as some others. Since he shoots reversal and often shows originals, a kind of continual re-assessment and re-editing can take place. Periodically Stamets reworks his material, and his friends and enthusiasts always pack into his apartment for his screenings of work-in-progress. Thus he exploits the particular suitability of Super-8mm for domestic space screening. These screenings may show films edited a mere hour before the event, and then based on audience response and further filming, Stamets may produce something in a vastly different final form at later screenings. Frequently the same footage doesn't seem quite the same from formal show to formal show. For example, in 1986 he showed *Powerful Fun*, a film about Chicago political spectacle, in a show at Chicago Filmmakers and the next year edited much of that footage into another work, *Chicago Politics: Theatre of Power*, which was transferred to video for distribution. Shots from his early *Washington For Jesus*, a 1979 documentary of a rally in the capitol, reappear at the end of *Iowa and Its Presidents*, a 1988 piece.

Stamets' work hasn't been seen or recognized very much outside of Chicago. Perhaps his often distinctively Chicago subject matter is more immediately compelling to natives than outsiders. But a much more obvious reason for this neglect is that Super-8mm does not distribute and exhibit easily. Like Regular-8mm, a marginalized form within an already marginalized sector of the art world, it is seldom taken seriously by critics, curators, programmers, teachers, 16mm filmmakers and other gate keepers. Few venues for independent and experimental work have the equipment to show Super-8mm in optimal theatrical circumstances.

## Two: Novo Dextro

Stamets' work over the past decade includes experimental films such as *A Lecture on the Eyeball*, contrasting visual beauty and aural reality, and personal portraits of his relatives. But his best known work consists of ethnographic documentaries of urban political life, such as *Chicago Politics: Theatre of Power* (available on MPI home video), which highlights Mayor Harold Washington's years. In Chicago, local politics is the favorite year-round spectator sport and

journalism feeds the fans all the latest. For about a decade, Stamets has followed "the pack" of reporters, T.V. technicians, photographers, PR hacks and others who cover City Hall and endless campaign appearances, press conferences, parades, ethnic banquets, and hype events. Stamets films the events from the edge—literally and figuratively. While T.V. news crews move about with \$80,000 video cameras, Stamets shoots with a Super-8mm camera that cost him a few hundred. While others shoot the official proceedings, Stamets covers the before and after, the unguarded moment, the aside, and the unexpected.

Stamets would be the first to recognize his marginal status in the press corps. But it would be a huge error to mistake marginality, a position in relation to a dominant (and usually unreflectively accepted) set of norms, for lack of seriousness and intellectual rigor. He is not a journalist *manqué* or an unprofessional social-documentary maker. Rather, he is a rigorous ethnographer whose primary tool for investigation is the Super-8mm camera and whose primary medium for presentation is the audio/visual screen. In short, Bill Stamets is a significant intellectual working outside of academia's narrow protocols.

A close analysis of one piece can reveal some characteristics of his working style. First, he offers a witty observation of the event that goes counter to the event. The artist's eye captures the comic aspect which in turn provides amusing pleasure in the detail, but which also goes against the grain of the hegemonic version of what happens at such an event. Second, the anthropologist's eye looks for the patterns that reveal the whole, that show underlying structures, and also the anomalies that mark the boundaries. Third, the feature reporter takes on a certain privileged omniscience in examining different sides of events.

**Novo Dextro: Purity and Danger** (1982, color, sound, 58 min.) can be read on several levels. In screen time it principally depicts a clash between a small group of far right believers (American Nazi Party, Ku Klux Klan, and America First) and people from Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Pride parade. Stamets follows some of the unfolding story: most notably he tracks the Nazi contingent of about 25 assembling and traveling to the park site where they intend to rally against homosexuals. We see their confrontation (separated by police) with about 2000 gay/lesbian supporters and the aftermath of people in the park discussing the event.

Simply in these terms the film is striking for its interviews with the young fascists, who rarely get to make their case in mainstream discourse. Predictably, it reveals (and basically discredits) their simplistic statements, inarticulate reasoning, and bluff bravado. Against the traditions and stereotypes of Nazi military order and Prussian discipline, these professed followers seem disorganized and slightly unkempt. While giving the Nazis a voice, Stamets is blatantly prejudiced in letting some speak. The most articulate male speaks off screen while Stamets removes and replaces the camera's daylight filter, thus drawing our attention away from the rhetoric and to the alteration of color. Rather than showing the speaker, Stamets frames portraits on the wall of deceased American Nazi leader George Lincoln Rockwell and General Douglas MacArthur. Another roll takes a fellow framed while standing in front of two videogames with the glowing titles

"Asteroids" and "Defenders" impinging on his delivery. Clearly this group is politically insignificant, yet they are capable of evoking a strong response. They have a symbiotic relation with several far left communist groups—a record of assaulting each other in public. They also have a symbolic importance for Jews and gays and lesbians.

While **Novo Dextro** is interesting for its immediate reportage of the Nazi-gay clash, the film attains compelling status from its analytic framework. The title, **Purity and Danger**, makes direct reference to Mary Douglas' classic anthropological analysis of pollution and taboo in different cultures. **Novo Dextro** (from the incorrect Latin, "New Right") can be considered a similar reflection on pollution and taboo in the U.S. at the start of the Reagan era. It draws connections between diverse events and public behaviors. Because it covers events that took place before AIDS became a well-known matter, today the film refers to a different epoch than the one we live in now. However, the kinds of juxtapositions Stamets creates in the film establish an analytic structure to consider attitudes toward social "pollution" even now.

The film begins with T.V.-screen images from **Psycho** of Tony Perkins driving Janet Leigh's auto into a pond and sinking it. A shot from a moving car shows clouds of black smoke rising on the horizon—a signal of disaster. A woman's voice-over explains, "violence has a certain excitement," and offers an analysis of ritualized violence as we see a military drill team at a parade. The opening proceeds through a series of public ritual encounters marking the need some people feel for dramatically demonstrating their beliefs in opposition to others'. The same pattern appears at the end of the film.

Through patterning and juxtaposition, Stamets makes it clear that while the Nazis speak against pollution by gays and Jews, they themselves are interpreted as pollution by others. Thus the film evolves a more complex analysis than simple reportage could achieve. We attend an orderly gathering of primarily Jewish solidarity against Nazis who obtained a permit to rally in a suburban park. We also see the fascists arriving in rather decrepit looking autos. An anamorphically distorted T.V. news report recapitulates the resulting confrontation of Nazis and stone-throwing protesters. Next, a speaker introduces Rev. Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority and we see three America First pickets attacking Falwell as a Zionist. Then a Fundamentalist Christian parade and rally for multi-denominational unity features an interview with a fellow carrying a huge cross: "a symbol of triumph," he proudly proclaims. While attendees sing "Hallelujah," with arms upraised, Stamets shows us a fellow with a hand puppet animal which mimes the verse.

In a section introduced on the audio track by an America First anti-Semitic phone message, Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne speaks at a public Chanukah candle-lighting ceremony where the electric light "flames" have to be assisted by screwing in the bulb when things don't go according to plan. While a cantor heartily sings, the camera catches Byrne glancing off as her attention wanders, obviously bored by the affair. Another rally for Jesus shows members of a doctrinal schism group disrupting the crowd and being verbally abused. What appears to be a group of

counter-protesting Moonies (members of the Unification Church) sing "God Bless America" while one holds a misspelled sign, "Support Regens Anti-Communism." Then a cascade of images shows Russian folklore dancing, orange-robed Hare Krishna chanters, disco dancing, hippies dancing, and a gospel choir. On T.V. Gene Siskel shows, interviews, and validates the gay music group, The Village People.

The form and politics of *Novo Dextro* raise several important questions about documentary as an experimental mode and as a means of analysis. Clearly Stamets does not feel compelled to remain in the strict observational mode of Frederick Wiseman's type of cinema vérité documentary. When he rides to the rally in their open truck with the ragtag band of Nazis, clustered together, hair blowing in the wind, he adds the editorial comment of Laurie Anderson's "O Superman" to the soundtrack. In his most blatant comment, he matches a shot of the Nazis departing the rally in their truck and with a shot of a sewage truck with the words "Sludge Removal" in bold letters.

At the same time, he conspicuously avoids interviews with recognizable spokespeople, authority figures, experts and pundits. The interviews depict everyday people and are often balanced elsewhere in the piece. Thus the cross carrier at the start is echoed at the Gay Pride parade by three Germans dressed as concentration camp inmates with pink triangles. One explains the need to make a public bodily display of this symbolism. The result is that the piece clearly has a point of view and politics vis-à-vis the Nazis. Yet it doesn't let others off the hook. While we see the gay parade we hear a male voice explaining that he doesn't look, talk or act like a gay man, yet he is one. His need to admit his disgust with men who fit the common stereotype puts another spin on "pride" and "pollution."

This type of documentary puts the problem of empiricism up front. The film essentially stays with the observable, even while it reconstitutes the observed and patterns it through selection and editing. But the film cannot address any aspect of the situation that isn't present to the camera. Thus the historical context, background information, and contrasting information is lost to observation and left out. Of course this same problem is at the heart of any ethnographic field work. But within the film there is no accounting (beyond the title) for the absence of rallies and demonstrations by liberals and leftists for a nuclear weapons freeze or in support of the Sandinistas or the FMLN in El Salvador or feminist events, although these all took place in the same time frame and would doubtless produce similar incongruous observations and contradictions.

The film leaves its audience with the question, why do people do these things? A Black man sits with a small PA system doing street corner preaching while holding a ventriloquist puppet: "God must take the nature of man." Given the whole film, this is not a totally bizarre, laughable or idiosyncratic moment, but its meaning is not self-evident. What replaces direct meaning is Stamets' eye for pattern. Certain things are officially sanctioned and others are marginal. Some people, by ownership, power, position or prestige, have access to the mass media to spread their views. Others have the street and their voice and sometimes

leaflets and a bull horn. Some people feel the need to go through certain public rituals to present their beliefs, ideas and emotions. The film is a meditation on this social phenomenon, particularly as it exists in a highly mass-mediated culture which includes the filmmaker's presence.

The events shown are compelling because Stamets avoids clichés such as the typical establishing shot of the crowd, cut to a spokesperson at a podium or a close-up interview. He almost always presents the view from the ranks and often the more unlikely members of the group. The parallels and repetitions are interesting once noticed and form patterns which seem significant. In this, Stamets moves far beyond the typical reportage and event documentary. As most activist-oriented documentary film/video makers quickly learn, nothing dates faster and is harder to get people to watch at a later date than demonstrations, parades and rallies, aside from the few seconds needed to establish that the event took place. An emotion and rhetoric which is warming at the moment almost invariably seems dead cold later. Thus while Stamets' work falls outside the typical boundaries of the social-political documentary, it illuminates something else which is not dealt with very well, if at all, in other modes. It shows the emotional bonding of declaring that one is part of a rule-bound group. It depicts the need to demonstrate belief in a public theatrical event. It represents the special state of community or threshold experience gained in collective public behavior.

Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* says society is built on contradiction. The stresses of contradiction bring about the need for coherence. When a principle of power or domination is applied to social life and is then contradicted by another principle or practice, notions of pollution are more likely to appear to establish boundaries and order. *Novo Dextro* operates with these ideas, but leaves unanswered the question of what contradictions are crucial here. Those of Right vs. Left? Those of anti-Semitism vs. pluralist tolerance? Those of changing gender roles? Those of sexual activity? The contradiction of capital vs. labor? This uncertainty is marked in the film by the lack of an unequivocal conclusion or summary. As in his other works, there's a sense of the narrative just trailing off, leaving us with a "to be continued."

### Three: Political newsreels

Over the years Stamets has made some important and powerful documentaries about Chicago politics. Stamets often calls this kind of film a "newsreel" and compares it to the now-defunct form with its prejudicial narration, concentration on authority figures, predilection for cheap shots, and coverage of the most public face of the news world. But the traditional newsreel always accepted the media event as a self-contained reality. By showing us the backside, the moments of waiting, the flaws and goofs as well, Stamets reverses priorities and mocks the pretense while showing the texture.

With *Iowa and Its Presidents* (1988, 50 min.) Stamets continues to examine political ritual, this time the Iowa primary of 87-88 with its plenitude of candidates. It begins with a middle-aged Black woman who seems to be seated in a bus station waiting area telling us she is running for President. She is a total unknown, but

has certain little pat phrases down, the dead giveaway of campaign rhetoric. But she doesn't speak in perfect standard English. We can't believe that she is serious, or will be recognized if she does try to run. Is she just playing a joke on us? Or is she a sincere but naive person? We don't know, and she disappears from the film at that point, never to return, but seems in retrospect, no more of a fool, or fooler, than the string of Republican and Democratic candidates stumping for votes in this political pilgrimage.

Running with the media through endless and repeated photo ops, the filmmaker provides a highly edited and interpretive view of events. We really get no substantial sense of the history, development or issues involved. But, the film seems to say, there weren't any anyway. Instead we see candidates directed by campaign organizers and press secretaries to jog, enter a mall, get a haircut, ride a bike, visit an old folks home, and so forth. Candidates are shown things to view in microscopes, and cross sections of hog snouts, as the campaign rolls on.

The classic early cinema vérité film, *Primary* (1960, Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker), employed a dramatic conflict narration (Hubert Humphrey vs. John F. Kennedy) leading to a highly suspenseful conclusion: who would win the contest? For Stamets in Iowa, the candidates are virtually interchangeable. It's not even clear which one is a Republican and which one is a Democrat most of the time. Only two campaigners stand out — preachers Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson — because their rhetoric and delivery vary from the secular norm. The others seem to be summed up on their trek for votes by Robert Dole's plaintive "What do I do now?" at the end of a staged media event, and Gary Hart's question in arriving at another location, "Which direction are we going?" The politicians seem more like puppets than leaders and talented mostly in the fake sincerity of campaigning. Stamets ends the film with footage of the White House exterior and a moment from the 1979 *Washington for Jesus* film, his first extended use of visual ethnography. While a preacher rants about "the holy power of love," a full-size Uncle Sam mannequin is seen with the crowd. The figure unexpectedly falls forward and its head rolls away. Frantically, a woman uprights the symbol and tries to replace the head: another hollow man needing close attention to maintain his symbolic standing.

Stamets' work contains a special relevance for the 1990s. It shows that one can find new ways to use documentary media to examine current society and politics, the powerful and everyday people and the contradictions of the present with intellectual acumen, personal presence and vision, and responsible good humor. Stamets provides a viable alternative for investigation and expression — a Super-8mm ethnography that demonstrates a profound intellectual imagination.

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